

Desert Sparrows *Passer simplex* in the Sudan

by J. S. Ash & G. Nikolaus

Received 19 February 1991

In his excellent monograph on the sparrows *Passer* spp. of the world Summers-Smith (1988), in discussing the Desert Sparrow *Passer simplex*, concluded that since the last century it appears to have become extinct in the Sudan, where its type locality is situated. Previously it was found in the north of this country south to Sennar ($13^{\circ}30'N$, $33^{\circ}37'E$) on the Blue Nile, east to the Red Sea at Suakim (= Suakin) ($19^{\circ}05'N$, $37^{\circ}20'E$), and west to the Libyan border (Cave & Macdonald 1955, Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1955, Nikolaus 1987, Vaurie 1956).

The notion that Desert Sparrows have disappeared from the Sudan is emphasised by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (*loc. cit.*) who, in describing its former distribution, add "but not recorded for the last 100 years"; and Cave & Macdonald (*loc. cit.*) remark "Said to have occurred long ago . . . possibly still occurring in extreme north-west." Etchécopar & Hüe (1964) go further by stating that it does not occur east of Ennedi (in Chad).

Desert Sparrows have actually been recorded on several occasions in the Sudan this century, but apparently none of them has been published. They were seen as recently as 1986 and quite probably have never been absent, rather than that they are re-establishing themselves. The following 9 records are known from the period 1935–1986.

1. 1935–1954. P. Hogg (*in litt.*) only found Desert Sparrows once, in the Jebel Meidob area (*c.* $15^{\circ}20'N$, $26^{\circ}30'E$), and also to the north of it in the one-degree squares of $16^{\circ}N$, $26^{\circ}E$, where they bred, and $17^{\circ}N$, $26^{\circ}E$.
2. 1958–1961. P. Dare (*in litt.*), when travelling from Khartoum to Dongola, recorded the species in one-degree square $17^{\circ}N$, $31^{\circ}E$.
3. 1 April 1964. J. E. Jany (*in litt.*), travelling from Omdurman to Dongola, saw a few in the tops of old acacia trees at the desert well of Ganetti ($18^{\circ}00'N$, $31^{\circ}16'E$), south of Debba.
4. December 1982. GN in one-degree square $15^{\circ}N$, $31^{\circ}E$, en route from Khartoum to Dongola, saw a pair in an open sandy area with scattered *Acacia nubica* bushes.
5. December 1982. GN in one-degree square $16^{\circ}N$, $31^{\circ}E$, en route from Khartoum to Dongola, found a pair in similar habitat to no. 3 above.
6. December 1982. GN in one-degree square $17^{\circ}N$, $31^{\circ}E$, en route from Khartoum to Dongola, saw 2 pairs in an open sandy area with scattered Tundub bushes *Capparis decidua*. They were accompanied by a Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, a species overwintering in the area.
7. January 1983. GN in one-degree square $15^{\circ}N$, $31^{\circ}E$, at 60 km NW of Khartoum, saw a male sheltering in an old stick nest, probably of *Spreo pulcher*, in a tall acacia in a wadi in open sandy grassland.
8. 26 September 1986. JSA & GN at $17^{\circ}19'N$, $31^{\circ}17'E$, 92 km SSE of Debba ($18^{\circ}05'N$, $30^{\circ}45'E$), found 4 (2♂♂, 2♀♀) in the vicinity of a pole and grass desert tea-house and its associated buildings.

9. 26 September 1986. JSA & GN at 16°55'N, 31°29'E, 144 km SSE of Debba, found a pair at an untidy domed nest with at least 2 recently hatched pulli at 3 m height in a Tundub bush. The female was taking insects to the nest.

Lynes (1924–1925), visiting the above and adjoining areas (North and Central Darfur, West and Central Kordofan, and North Nuba Province), did not record Desert Sparrows; nor did J. F. Madden (personal notes) working around Dongola (19°20'N, 30°29'E) in 1947–1951.

From local accounts the area in which we saw birds had become increasingly desertified in recent years; previously it had been inhabited by stock-owning people. All that remained in 1986 were scattered small bushes, slightly more prolific at the second site in a barely discernible shallow wadi, and elsewhere some ruined and deserted habitations.

Summers-Smith (*loc. cit.*) states that this sparrow exists at greater density where there are larger trees, so that the present apparently small population appears to occupy less than optimal habitat. It is also interesting that it was breeding at the hottest time of the year. A few days earlier at Wadi Halfa (21°55'N, 31°20'E) daily shade temperature maxima had ranged from 45° to 50°C, and it seemed to be no less hot in the present area, where bushes were ringed with dead and dying Palearctic migrants of which 19 species were found. The means by which the effective incubation temperature is maintained at such high ambient temperatures requires investigation, although Sopyev (1965) shows that the time spent incubating by Desert Sparrows is reduced when outside temperatures rise.

Desert Sparrows seem always to have been rare and poorly known in the Sudan. The long periods when there were no records at the end of the last century and the first half of this one could have resulted from lack of observation and/or recording, rather than a total absence of birds. Probably it has had a continuous presence in the Sudan since it was originally discovered there and the observations quoted above do not imply a recolonisation. Like other desert species, Desert Sparrows are probably partly nomadic and numbers in any one area, and their distribution, may vary from year to year.

Acknowledgements

We thank Dr J. D. Summers-Smith for his comments on this paper, and the following who kindly allowed their observations to be included here: P. Dare, P. Hogg and J. E. Jany.

References:

- Cave, F. O. & Macdonald, J. D. 1955. *Birds of the Sudan*. Oliver & Boyd.
Etchécopar, R. D. & Hüe, F. 1964. *Les Oiseaux du Nord de l'Afrique*. Editions N. Boubée & Cie.
Lynes, H. 1924–1925. On the birds of North and Central Darfur with notes on the West and Central Kordofan and North Nuba Provinces of British Sudan. *Ibis* (11)6: 399–446, 648–719; (12)1: 71–131, 344–416, 541–590, 757–797.
Mackworth-Praed, C. W. & Grant, C. H. B. 1952, 1955. African Handbook of Birds, Series 1, Vols 1 & 2. *Birds of Eastern and North Eastern Africa*. Longman.
Nikolaus, G. 1987. Distribution atlas of Sudan's birds with notes on habitat and status. *Bonn. Zool. Monogr.* no. 25.
Sopyev, O. 1965. The Desert Sparrow in Kara-Kum. *Ornitologiya* 7: 134–141.
Summers-Smith, J. D. 1988. *The Sparrows: a study of the genus Passer*. T. & A. D. Poyser.

Vaurie, C. 1956. Systematic notes on Palearctic birds, No. 24. Ploceidae; the genera *Passer*, *Petronia* and *Montifringilla*. *Am. Mus. Novit.* no. 1814.

Addresses: Dr J. S. Ash, Godshill Wood, Fordingbridge, Hants SP6 2LR, U.K.; G. Nikolaus, Bosenbüttel 4, Spieka 2859, Germany.

© British Ornithologists' Club 1991

BOOKS RECEIVED

Brooke, M. & Birkhead, T. (eds) 1991. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Ornithology*. Pp. 362. Numerous text-figures in colour and black-and-white, diagrams and maps. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0 521 36205 9. £24.95. 28 × 27 cm.

An attractive, and also intellectually stimulating, volume which presents a scientific and at the same time very readable survey of the whole of ornithology in 362 pages—a formidable achievement which is accomplished by reducing the systematic survey of bird families, usually the main part of a book of this sort, to 35 pages (the passerine families are merely listed) and dealing mainly with subjects. The various chapters, or parts of chapters, are by 39 contributors, many of them leading specialists. Special topics (e.g. tool-using, food-caching, factors influencing bird distribution, niches and ecological segregation) are dealt with in 'information panels' interspersed in appropriate places in the text. Thus this is not an alphabetically arranged encyclopedia of traditional type, but the comprehensive index in three parts (scientific names, common names, subjects) enables the reader to run down information relatively easily. References are confined to a 3-page list of 'Further reading'. For a stimulating survey of recent research in ornithology, and underlying biological principles, this book could not easily be bettered; but the large format and square shape make it easier to put on a coffee table than in its rightful place on a personal library shelf.

Holmes, D. 1990. *The Birds of Sumatra and Kalimantan*. Pp. xii+83. 25 colour plates. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0 19 588971 1. £6.95. 19.5 × 13 cm.

This brief but useful introduction to the birds of Sumatra and the Indonesian part of Borneo does not aim to be comprehensive; 148 species are described and a further 129 referred to more briefly. The colour plates, by Stephen Nash, illustrate a good selection of mainly forest birds, and some others are illustrated in black-and-white text-figures. It is planned to produce an Indonesian language edition, in the hope of stimulating greater local interest in a rich and, inevitably, threatened avifauna.

Inskipp, C. & T. 1991. *A Guide to the Birds of Nepal*. Pp. 400. 8 colour plates, numerous text-figures and maps. Christopher Helm. ISBN 0 7136 8109 8. £35.00. 25 × 19 cm.

An updated edition of the excellent book published in 1985. It follows the first edition closely; but one more species has now been added to the list (now 836 species), much new information has been incorporated into the text, and the invaluable distribution maps (increased from 676 to 703) have been improved, especially by new records from the previously very little-known west of the country. The 8 colour plates are unchanged except for an improved plate of buntings, and additional species are illustrated in text-figures. For those who do not know the first edition, it may be mentioned that this is not a field-guide; the emphasis is on distribution, but there is a useful 49-page section, with clear line drawings, on the identification of difficult groups (mainly birds of prey, waders, gulls, owls, wagtails, pipits, warblers, rosefinches and buntings), and the colour plates illustrate difficult warblers, rosefinches and buntings.

The visibly most obvious change is that the text is set in 'proper' print instead of the camera-ready type-face of the old edition, with the consequence that it is much easier and pleasanter to read and also more economical of space; hence the amplified text takes almost exactly the same number of pages as before.

Phillips, A. R. 1991. *The Known Birds of North and Middle America*. Part II, Bombycillidae; Sylviidae; Sturnidae; Vireonidae. Pp. liii+249. 5 colour plates. Published by the author (3540 S. Hillcrest Dr. no. 5, Denver, Colorado 80237). ISBN 0 9617402 1 3. \$64.00. 23 × 15 cm.

This is the second part of a highly individual and outspoken work, the first part of which was published, also by the author, in 1986 (see *Ibis* 129: 586–587). The rather surprising title